

Singing Translators and Mobile Traditions: Cross-cultural Performances of Italian Folk Music in Contemporary Australia

Eliana Maestri, Rita Wilson

University of Exeter, Monash University

(<e.maestri@exeter.ac.uk>; <rita.wilson@monash.edu>)

Abstract

Translators, as intercultural mediators, play various roles, among which as singers and performers. Striking examples of singing and performing translators can be found in multicultural Australia. They direct Italian Australian folk choirs and transform, enrich, and enhance the Italian folk repertoire and cultural traditions across continental borders and language barriers. By applying methodological approaches, at the crossroads between translation and performance, theorized by Maria Tymoczko (1995), Barbara Godard (2000), and Sandra Bermann (2014), we will demonstrate how cross-cultural and mobile folk performances and traditions are connecting communities in contemporary Australia.

Keywords: *folk, mediators, multicultural, multilingual traditions, performance, singing, translation, voice*

In 1996, Translation Studies scholar Theo Hermans published a seminal article on the voice of the translator. Apart from identifying valuable scenarios where that voice can be heard prominently and notably, Hermans demonstrated how unique the translator's voice can be. A limitation of Hermans' study is the focus on the written text and the translator's written discursive presence, which effectively rules out another, equally important, field of research: the oral and the aural nature of texts. Until quite recently, there has been little investigation of the translation processes occurring within and around music. In an effort to partially fill this gap, this article provides a case study that illustrates how folk music and its performative drive, aided by the translational strategies adopted by different translators, has fostered multiculturalism and transnationalism as inclusive social practices.

We begin by asking: What kind of voice can we hear when a translator is a “singing” translator? Or, to put it another way, what is the translational role of an artist who performs Italian folk music by mediating between cultural heritages and boundaries within a diasporic context? In order to answer this question, we will use part of the data collected during Maestri’s 2014 Fellowship funded by the European and EU Centre at Monash University, Melbourne, and supported by the School of Languages, Literatures, Cultures and Linguistics, with Wilson as Co-investigator. We will quote sections of the interviews that Maestri conducted in Melbourne with Italian Australian folk musicians, performers, and activists Kavisha Mazzella and Elvira Andreoli about their long-term music directorship of Italian Australian women’s folk choirs *Le gioie delle donne* and *La voce della luna*. Mazzella, born to an Italian father and an Anglo-Burmese mother (Mazzella 2014), directed *Le gioie delle donne* in Fremantle (Western Australia) in the 1990s and then *La voce della luna* in Melbourne from 1995 to 2013. Andreoli, whose parents came from different regions in Italy, her father from the Marche and her mother from Campania (Oreglia 2016), took over immediately after that and remains, to date, the music director of *La voce della luna*. The choir’s repertoire is very broad and spans across Italian regions and centuries.

Despite their remarkable contribution to the Italian Australian folk repertoire and Mazzella’s own international success as a folk performer and songwriter, the story of these women’s choirs remains unknown outside Australia. The edited volume by Linda Barwick and Marcello Sorce Keller (2012) *Italy in Australia’s Musical Landscape* gives limited attention to Mazzella and the Italian women’s folk choirs. The book, which positions itself within the field of Italian diasporic music study, concentrates on community activities mainly centred around Flinders University scholar Antonio Comin’s performances and his work on folk groups, including the Italian Folk Ensemble, and their dissemination of Italian traditional culture in Adelaide, Perth, and Sydney. Mazzella is mentioned very briefly and only as a successor to the Italian Folk Ensemble (Barwick, Sorce Keller 2012, 59).

The aim of this article is to give “voice” to these women’s choirs and their musical directors, or, better, to hear their “voice” and appreciate their cross-cultural translations: the translations of folk repertoires from the Italian diasporic context into the Australian multicultural and polylingual environment. In order to do so, we will apply the methodological framework, situated at the crossroads between Translation Studies and Performance Studies, developed by Maria Tymoczko (1995), Barbara Godard (2000), and Sandra Bermann (2014). Their work, which highlights the multiple assonances and the melodic similarities between translation and performance, explores the fruitful interplay between these artistic practices, and unpacks the meaning and significance of the performativity of translation and the translatability of performance. By applying this methodological framework, we will demonstrate how these women’s dedication to their Italian cultural heritage

is manifested in their creative practices. We will show that their determination to keep Italian folk legacies alive is revealed in their (re)appropriation of the Italian historical past and folk traditions, their commitment to celebrate their roots and to sing for various communities across language barriers in Australia and, last but not least, their postcolonial “activism” through reinterpretations and retranslations of the Italian tradition of *canto popolare* and oral storytelling. Their collective passion for singing coupled with the desire to represent on stage their migrant past are encapsulated emblematically in Andreoli’s words:

The stories are very similar. Our ages are different, [...] where we live and our socio-economic background... But in terms of the story of immigration, that’s what connects us. And the hunger for the homeland is what I am attracted to. It’s the nostalgia that I’ve seen in people’s faces. They experienced it. I hear the stories. I relate to it, because my father and mother migrated. So I get a double dose of fun. One, because it’s fun. And two, because I share and I am part of these stories. (2014)¹

In recalling a number of successful performances with *La voce della luna*, Andreoli stresses the undeniable emotional connection between the women’s choirs and their migrant past, their longing for belonging, and their performative drive: “People were crying when we were singing ‘il tuo mondo, vorrei tornare indietro per un momento ma il tempo non si ferma corre lontano’” (*ibidem*).

According to Mazzella, it all started in 1988-1989 when she founded the musical group *I papaveri* with her brothers and an Italian migrant from Sicily, who introduced his fellow musicians to the work of *Nuova compagnia di canto popolare*. The group started singing exclusively for elderly women migrants at the *Amicizia Club* in Fremantle and was tremendously successful. In 1990, Mazzella had a “crazy” idea. She recruited a number of amateur singers to perform at Italian festivals and ended up directing *Le gioie delle donne*, a choir of women, “singing – as she says – with their handbags on stage”. This act of “claiming their culture in an Australian city” (2014) is a clear indicator of how felicitous their “doing” of translation was. To explore further the performative and theatrical nature of their translation acts, it is useful to turn to the work done by Godard and by Bermann on the “converging paradigms” of translation and performance (Godard 2000, 328). In particular, both translation and performance rely on certain mutually shared traits: iterable, repeatable, different, metonymic, transformative, citational, and inaugural (Bermann 2014; Godard 2000). While casting light on the artistic nexus between translation and performance, these converging paradigms will help us appreciate the theatrical, translational and performative aspect of the Italian Australian choirs and the

¹ All quotations attributed to Elvira Andreoli, Kavisha Mazzella, and Marisa Fazio are from the interviews Eliana Maestri conducted in Melbourne in March and April 2014.

reasons why they are considered to date very special groups: “Like a cult” (Fazio 2014); an “iconic institution in Melbourne”; and, more generally, “a national heritage or a treasure” (Andreoli 2014) across Australia.

By performing the drama of iterability, translation repeats its source into a new context and in so doing it is “not [...] a copy governed by rules of correspondence in a restricted economy of loss but [...] an original and creative act, ‘a proper symbolic event’, within a general economy of differentiated proliferation” (Godard 2000, 328). *Le gioie delle donne’s* folk interpretations proliferated across the Australian continent, through the “whole folk process” and within a “circular relationship”. While describing the birth of the first women’s folk choir, Mazzella explains:

The first part of the project was to sing songs that they [the women] remembered. So we reconstructed the memories. They taught me the songs and I basically taught them how to sing them as a group. So there was this ‘circular relationship’. And... so the verses were not necessarily completely right. But it did not matter because I was embracing the whole folk process, the folk process of memories, songs, memories, you change it a bit and then you pass it on [...]. The second part of that project was to write about them, their lives. And that was in songs. And so I did that and I became a songwriter because of them. And after that I could not stop writing songs. (2014)

The differentiated proliferation that Godard talks about can be identified with various stages and phases of the folk cycle and creative process enacted by Mazzella and *Le gioie delle donne* in the 1990s and re-enacted by the subsequent folk group. Their collaborative work, almost quintessentially translational and interpretative, applied difference, as a principle, to the proliferation of their artistic acts whose differentiation and diversification gave rise to endless and varied reproductions and replications of their selves. To use Albert B. Lord’s words, “the picture that emerges is not really one of conflict between preserver of tradition and creative artist; it is rather one of the preservation of tradition by the constant re-creation of it. The ideal is a true story well and truly retold” (in Tymoczko 1995, 11). Difference, differentiation, and diversification were clearly guaranteed and safeguarded by the original and inventive interchange between memory and creativity, as Mazzella claims. “Suitcase Serenata”, an album released by Mazzella’s folk group, *I viaggiatori*, pays tribute to *Le gioie delle donne* as a precious depository for memories. We read on the CD booklet that the group was “formed by Kavisha Mazzella to perform a live Italian folk music score for a silent documentary film ‘Dall’Italia all’Australia’ for the 2006 National Folk Festival in Canberra” and it sang songs written by Mazzella as well as those learned from other women migrants in Fremantle. “Valzer della fisarmonica”, for example, is a folk song that “Kavisha learnt [...] from her dear friend Fina Lo Pilato of Fremantle who was born in 1915 in Sicily and migrated to Australia in the fifties”. Lo Pilato sang “this in the film ‘Joys of the Women’. She lived to the grand age of 92 years old and passed away in March 2008” (*I viaggiatori* 2011).

Folk music, especially when it pertains to the oral tradition, modulates conflicting drives in an attempt to negotiate memorizing and forgetting, stability and change, replacement and consolidation (Bohlman 1988). The dynamic nature of folk music, as explained by Philip V. Bohlman, varies from culture to culture and develops along a continuum whose combined degrees of transformation and preservation depend on a “remarkable range of cultural, musical, and psychological factors animat[ing] and stem[ming] the processes of change in oral tradition” (1988, 19). In discussing folk music transmission, Bohlman (17-18) maintains that some cultures are more flexible and permeable than others and, if this is the case, they are more inclined to personal input, variations, adaptations, amendments, and alterations. Alterations and “the propensity of [folk] pieces to absorb new material as they change” depend therefore on numerous factors, among which the impact played by the outside: “Prolificacy results from [...] external borrowing” (19). The oral tradition of folk music can in fact appropriate resources, stimuli, and inspiration from other genres and cultures, considered as external and located outside the immediate boundaries of specific artistic habits and ethnic communities. In this light, the transnational nature of the Italian Australian women’s folk choirs operating across languages and cultural borders enhanced and empowered the proliferating and translational practices of the musical groups based on permeability, change, and difference. Both choirs were happy to interpret folk songs originating from different Italian regions and representing different realities and experiences. They were also pleased to welcome Mazzella’s expertise, capitalize on it, and meet the challenge to interpret unconventional and non-canonical songs, such as the ones written by Mazzella. The CD booklet accompanying the 1997 album, “Stepping Out”, stresses the mobile and cross-cultural nature of the group on so many levels:

La voce della luna [sic] (meaning “the voice of the moon”) is the voice of the eternal feminine: soft, stormy, sweet, raw, wild, pagan, earthy and strong. We celebrate the singing of the mother to the sleepy child, the singing of the factory workers, the farm hands and rouse-about harvesting grain, church singing, and the songs of feast, funeral, wedding and dance. These songs are of many journeys from Italy to Australia, and from the memories of friends and relatives scattered around this vast country, who kindly gave them to us on bits of paper. They were collected with joy and now find themselves being sung by a mob of wild Italian women in Melbourne. (La voce della luna 1998)

Under the direction of Mazzella, *Le gioie delle donne* and *La voce della luna* proved to be entertaining and creative “singers of tales”, in Lord’s use of the term. In his seminal work, *The Singer of Tales*, Lord praises oral epic poets, including a number of ballad and folk singers (1974 [1960], 13-14), for celebrating the power of orality and the ability to mix innovation and tradition “without memorizing a fixed form” (22). This is analogous to the differentiated proliferations of the choirs’ folk performances and musical pieces, which took

on various shapes and forms over the years. From our interviews, we were able to map how and why Andreoli and Mazzella produced numerous translations and/or folk music interpretations, all of which interlinked in a metonymic chain. Andreoli, for example, perpetuates to date Mazzella's tradition and intersperses *La voce della luna's* performances with interlingual explanations and cross-cultural stories: "I always, in the middle of the song or at the beginning of the song, tell the story of the song, I have always done that even as a solo performer" (Andreoli 2014). The story of the songs is historically loaded and discloses an almost mythical past, which can sometimes be accessed and explored only if introduced and translated into English. Translations prove to be useful not only for the Anglo-Saxon community (not familiar with Italian or Italian dialects), but also for other Australian communities, including those in the community who are Italian only by descent. Andreoli says: "What I love to do is to explain the history... because some people in the choir were not born in Italy. They are from Italian descent. And they sing songs that they haven't fully understood the meaning of" (*ibidem*).

Arguably, providing the translations does not alter the nature and ethos of the folk experience. Folk experiences are nonetheless founded on translation as a form of recreation and "rewriting" (Tymoczko 1995, 12). Following Tymoczko, we would argue that translation, in its many forms, strengthens the metonymic chain connecting the differentiated proliferations of the choirs' folk performances. In order to explain the metonymic principle regulating the dynamics of transmission in oral tradition (including folklore), Tymoczko draws on John Foley by claiming that "when a traditional oral tale is told, the telling is metonymic. For a traditional audience each telling evokes metonymically all previous tellings of the tale that the audience has participated in and, further, the telling instantiates and reifies metonymically the entire tradition that the audience and teller share" (1995, 14). In other words, oral tradition (including folk music) is based on a proliferation of similar and/or related tales, which, while undergoing a process of translation/interpretation, continue to maintain strong links with other versions of their almost mythical origin. The significance acquired by these versions (in our case, songs and interlingual tales) testifies to the need for endless proliferations and recreations, and for the community's participation in the remembering and telling of the tales/mythical origins. In this light, Andreoli's translations into English of sections of the folk songs contribute to the recreation of these numerous versions and, at the same time, to the re-evocation of similar tales in the audiences' mind (including the members of the choirs). Some of these tales were heard during previous performances of the choirs, some others on other occasions and under different (yet similar) circumstances. Andreoli confirms that the folk songs

were the songs potentially sung in the orphanages. The women used to wash the dishes... I know that my mother washed the dishes in an orphanage in Italy in

the south and at dinner time the women would be in the kitchen washing dishes by hand and singing songs like ‘Quel mazzolin di fiori’. (2014)

Metonymic refractions do not only echo similar instances of telling of tales. They strive to evoke the original tale, which, even if it is not so easily retrievable, activates in the recipients’ minds the choir’s migrant past:

A song that gives me great emotions is ‘E trallaleru’. You know. It’s a Sicilian song. I am not Sicilian but I know many of the Sicilian women in that choir would have left their friends and their parents and they would have worked so hard in Italy. The song says ‘my hands [have been scraped] almost to the bones from rubbing and scratching the wood to make the vineyards so that we can have the vendemmia this year and then when it’s time to collect the grapes I am washing my hands, there is nothing: that’s it. I cannot do it any more’. I feel how hard it would have been for people. (*Ibidem*)

Translation and performance do not simply share repetition and theatricality as common traits. To explore the “converging paradigms” between these practices and disciplines, Bermann draws on Godard’s work and builds in a third element to the equation, transformation:

Barbara Godard discusses the translator’s work as ‘transformance’, a neologism bringing together the terms performance, translation and transformation [...]. She explores not only translation’s dramatic dialogism (the play of author’s and translator’s voices) but also the importance of repetition and transformation. (Bermann 2014, 292)

In this light, Mazzella’s songwriting could potentially be described as “transformance” in as much as its performative and translational nature carries distinctive elements of transformation and renovation through “recontextualization” (*ibidem*). In Mazzella’s case, repetition serves “to carry across into a different state, to transform” and “performing in the here and now is a turning, a making strange through a recontextualization that opens new networks or fields in which to situate a gesture, a body, a word” (Godard in *ibidem*). The power of Mazzella’s songwriting originates from her recontextualization techniques both in terms of lyrics and in terms of musical patterns. When asked to map out her cross-cultural journey as a songwriter, Mazzella illustrated the major role played by her recontextualization strategies:

My journey is that [...] I started going to folk clubs [...] when I was sixteen [...]. I heard a lot of Irish music and English music and that inspired me. I like story songs and I like ballads because in those story songs they are telling the story. And then when I met the women [Le gioie delle donne] I started writing about their lives but [...] I still wanted to do anyway a bit more pop: somehow to make the folk and the pop work together. Now I’ve let go of that idea. I’ve gone and made a full circle. But singing the Irish English folk atmosphere inspired me to do the same thing with

my own culture. [...] And with my own influences and living in an English-speaking country and with those kinds of cultural sensibility, all that kind of stuff goes into a fresh interpretation of the Italian folk songs which would sound different to [...]: it's a translation of experience. (2014)

Mazzella's translation techniques are markedly based on practices of recontextualization and the dramatic mixtures of voices. As she herself confirms, "my songs are about true stories about celebrating life, love, journeys and displacement, physical and spiritual. They are about the search for home, earthly and mystical" (I viaggiatori 2011). Her musical taste is quintessentially mobile and itinerant, travelling across countries and ethnic communities, embracing cross-cultural modes of expression, and enriching the quality of her folk performances and choir directorship. Bohlman corroborates, actually, that "the specialization of the folk musician usually proffers mobility, both literal and figurative. This mobility brings the musician into contact with new forms of aesthetic expression, a wide range of social settings, and, rather often, groups other than the immediate one of which the musician is a member" (1988, 84). Mazzella's voice echoes other performers' voices along a translational and metonymic spectrum that combines, mixes, and overlays authors' and translators' voices dramatically and theatrically ad infinitum.

Mazzella's translation strategies, both domesticating and foreignizing, are also remarkably centred on storytelling techniques, which she uses to translate into English Italian women's stories of migration. Not only did she provide non-Italian-speaking audiences with English introductions of Italian folk songs during *La voce della luna's* performances, she also wrote *ex novo* folk songs inspired by the Italian migrant community in Fremantle. On numerous occasions, Mazzella proved to be a memorable folk performer who emerged from the crowd by giving voice to unconventional personalities and identities, coming from a different context to the one represented by traditional Italian folk music. She emerges from what Bohlman has described as the "background of voiceless tradition-bearers" and comes to represent the "particular type of folk musician whose activities illumine the rest of the community in new ways, casting up new details and putting other exceptional individuals in a more distinct chiaroscuro" (1988, 72). The exceptional individuals who appear to populate Mazzella's songs are the Italian migrant women in Fremantle whose lives and hardships symbolize the range of adversities and challenges met while migrating to and settling in Australia. "Wedding Sheets", in particular, talks about an Italian woman's dream for a better life and a better future². To follow her dreams, this woman married an Italian man by proxy and moved overseas:

² For an investigation of first-generation and second-generation Italian migrants' hopes for a better future in Australia, see Maestri (2014).

Long ago embroidered by a girl
 That sat by the fire with her sisters and her mother
 Each stitch sewn so carefully
 Each flower for love
 A child for each flower

We sat together in the long and bitter winters
 All sewing our dream into the cloth
 Our hopes and our fears
 Our joys and our tears
 We spin, we weave the flax, the blue flowers
 Now fade into gold

To spin and weave them into towels
 To press our faces into them years later
 And singing at the tops of our voices
 One woman sings, we all answer

Then the long journey to a far away country
 Australia
 I'd never seen the sea before
 I must marry a man
 Whose photograph I'm holding in my hand
 I'm scared and nervous
 To give my body to the hands of a stranger
 He's the friend of my brother,
 He went before us to work, to save some money

Oh I'm so hungry
 The children of Napoli
 Are hungry
 Wistful eyes
 I see their eyes, I say goodbye
 I'm leaving today
 "per una vita migliore"
 "per una vita migliore"

We won't be hungry we won't be poor
 "cucendo il mio sogno, cucendo il mio sogno"
 My dreams are in my sheets
 My sheets are in my suitcase
 My suitcase in my hand
 As I step off the land
 Onto the boat
 "addio!"
 (Mazzella 2017)

Confirmation of the source of the song is found in the CD booklet of “Suitcase Serenata”: “Kavisha wrote this song when she formed the choir ‘The Joys of the Women’ with Italian immigrant women in Fremantle in 1990 and heard their stories of migration. One such story is that of the ‘Sposa Procura’ – the arranged marriage” (I viaggiatori 2011). The reference to the woman’s “dreams” being “in the sheets”, is an allusion to the wedding sheets that were traditionally part of an Italian woman’s trousseau, while the subsequent reference to the sheets being “in the suitcase” alludes to the woman’s future being tied to that of her husband in a new land. The originality of Mazzella’s “Wedding Sheets” lies in the interplay between repetition and transformation. The song, which has both a personal and a universal resonance, evokes such rhythmic and narrative patterns as ballads (also reproduced in folk songs from Ireland or Northern Italy) and is representative of Mazzella’s unique mode of expression, a mode of expression whose storytelling techniques enrich and renovate the Italian folk repertory from within. In writing this song, Mazzella capitalized on “the additive productivity of cultural difference” theorized by Godard (2000, 331) and produced a song that sits originally and metonymically within the Italian tradition. In fact, her songs are the creative expression of Godard’s theoretical reflection on how reformulating translation opens performance to a potential series “by emphasising the additive productivity of cultural difference and collective interaction with those of its multiple systems of signification, and so posit[s] contingent as well as continuous transformation, metonymic combinations rather than metaphoric substitutions” (*ibidem*).

Differentiated proliferations and non-identical repetitions of acts (both translational and performative acts/signs) also define their “citational” quality, in the Derridean sense of the term. As Kathleen Davis observes, a good instance of citational quality is offered by a specific act/sign: the signature, and the “possibility of repeating a signature in various contexts is what defines and validates it, and in each instance it must be recognized and accepted as the same, even though in each instance it must be a different signature” (1997, 39). So, variation in repetition is the key to understanding not only differentiated proliferation mechanisms, but also citationality and the unquestionable impact of contexts and audiences/spectators on the felicitous act of the sign. In the context of translation and performance, the relational nature of the act and the spectators’ contribution to its success are essential components of the act itself. Both Mazzella and Andreoli stress the Australian audiences’ positive responses to the choirs. To express the intensity of the events, Mazzella speaks emotively of “love”:

Aussies had not seen anything like this before. [...] What was exciting was that the audience fell in love with them, just as I had fallen in love with them. [...] This amazing love affair started with the community, with these Italian women who had been basically, you know, in the house, at church and in the community. And that’s it. All of a sudden, there was this bridge, this amazing thing, where they got connected with the Australian community, which of course they were already part of, but there was not a way in. (2014)

Love is also part of Andreoli's vocabulary and the language she uses to illustrate her directorship of *La voce della luna*: "I really love the joy on the faces of the people, especially of older people when they see a younger person playing a song that they know from their childhood. And most of the time it is a case of... 'Have you known this? Why do you know this? Why are you playing this?' And the look of surprise is what I love" (2014).

By expressing the feelings of love and happiness aroused by the choirs' rehearsals and performances on stage, Mazzella and Andreoli also give voice to the dialectical relationship between the choirs, the Italian community, and the Australian audience – a dialectical relationship typical of transnational contexts. As Bohlman illustrates, "when different ethnic communities and social groups come into contact, the interrelation of cultural core and boundaries becomes more dynamic. As one is forced to recognize other traditions, one is more sharply aware of the characteristics of one's own" (1988, 62). The role folk music plays in such multicultural and transnational contexts is crucial. To quote Bohlman once again, "the 'oppositional process' of identity not only produces new patterns of group-formation; it also strengthens the role of folklore as a shared and common set of traditions" (64). Folk music and traditions crystallize collective values, intensify synergies between group members, and expand the ways these members project their values and identity outside their comfort zone. In this light, one can appreciate the significance of the surprise and joy perceived by Andreoli on the faces of the elderly members of the audience. Italian *canto popolare* represents a treasured depository for the cultural heritage of their homeland, their shared transnational values, and sense of "Italianness". Their body language reveals positive astonishment whenever they see younger generations access and endorse these carefully stored beliefs, ideals, and worldviews of which the elderly think they are the only gatekeepers. For this reason, they often disclose a strong sense of collective identity that they confidently and joyfully use to win other people's hearts. As Mazzella claims, the women's performances conveyed synergies and energies, "roaring energy", the "nonna energy", the "energy of the earth" (2014), "the beauty of the songs" and their enthusiastic celebration of life, life beyond cultural and ethnic differences. The positive response of the Italian and Australian audiences to the musical groups contributes to the completion of the above-mentioned transformation cycle. Indeed, the audience actively participates in the translation process: "By engaging with performance the spectators, whether collectively or individually, are agents of translation but also sites of transformation of cultural and ethical discourses" (Marinetti 2013, 312).

While discussing the synergies between translation and performance, Godard notes: "Repetition performs simultaneously a critical and a creative process [...]. In both theatre and translation, repetition entails a movement from one medium into a different one in a process with affinities to 'mapping'" (2000, 328). In this case, the media involved in the repetition/translation/

performance process are the stage, the big screen, and literature. Explaining the genesis of *Le gioie delle donne* and *La voce della luna*, Mazzella refers to them as a series of translations of experience. It is, in effect, a form of “affective mapping”, that is, an aesthetic practice aimed to represent “the historicity of one’s affective experience”, through which a political issue can be transformed (Flatley 2008, 4). The various representations of the migration experience of Italian women create a map that is meant to be not so much the charting of a territory, but rather, a tool providing a feeling of orientation, and soliciting mobility. The mapping begins in 1993, when Italian filmmaker Franco di Chiera made a fifty-minute documentary entitled *The Joys of the Women*, which acknowledged the power, drive, and vitality of Italian women migrants on and off stage. A few years later, Graham Pitts wrote a play entitled *Emma Celebrazione!* (1996) based on the memoir *Emma: A Translated Life* (1990) to bring the life story of Emma Ciccotosto, a foundation member of *Le gioie delle donne*, to the stage. The play became a musical and Mazzella was asked to direct its choir in Melbourne. *Le gioie delle donne* could not move to Melbourne and, in 1995, at the request of Playbox Theatre, Kavisha formed a second choir, that soon became *La voce della luna* (a title inspired by Federico Fellini’s final fairy tale-like film). Once the eight-week run of the play was over, Mazzella continued to direct the Melbourne choir until 2013 when Andreoli took over. A specular view of the transformative mapping process (from the literary rather than the choral perspective) is provided by the novella *A Leopard’s Kiss* (2011) written by another long-standing member of the choir, Italian Australian writer Marisa Fazio. In her interview, Fazio talked about how the singing with the choir “flavoured” her work:

Learning traditional folk songs from Italy which are not sung that much, you know, outside of our group is really, pretty special and it does flavour my work: [...] the musicality of it; the theatrics of being with forty Italian women is pretty exciting. (2014)

A Leopard’s Kiss riffs off Tomasi Di Lampedusa’s famous novel, *Il Gattopardo*, entwining the story of the Sicilian writer enduring the frustration and joy of writing his masterpiece whilst nearby a young couple farewell their home to settle in far-off Australia. At the launch of her book, Fazio sang the refrain of the “popular song” which concludes each page of couplets in the first section of the novella as well as the “love song” contained in the second section, effectively merging musical and poetic boundaries.

The diverse mediatic representations of the choirs are depicted in very positive terms enhancing the creative and explosive nature of these translational experiences. Di Chiera’s film unchained a “nuclear reaction”, Mazzella says. “People were blown away by the film [...] they were shocked to see themselves on the big screen [...] not just movie stars [...] people that had worked in the factories [...] or from peasant backgrounds” (2014). Some of *La voce della*

luna's performances were "very healing": "Old forgotten songs were sung by old people" (*ibidem*) who just wanted to celebrate life and increase cultural sensitivity. These mediatic representations are a refraction of the choirs' ethos and a metonymic repetition of their mission.

Part of this creative repetition is the "translation's scene-stealing encounter with otherness" which "generates linguistic innovation" (Bermann 2014, 290). In folk music, linguistic innovation entails the mixtures of genres and the original recreation of patterns and frames. What attracted Mazzella and Andreoli to *canto popolare* was not merely its regional nature, but also its dramatic encounter with the other, which makes it so distinctive: "The melody is different. [...] Italy is close to Africa, Asia Minor and Greece and it has got this incredible textures coming through the music in modes. [...] It is very enchanting" (Mazzella 2014). The almost mythical encounter with Alterity is not dramatized only by the language and rhythm of *canto popolare*. It is also dramatized by the choirs' translational and metonymic performances:

Translation [...] can enact a similar theatrical repetition [similar to drag performances] and questioning of social and historical norms. Using the citational potential of its mode, it can exaggerate, highlight, displace, and queer normative expectations across genders and cultures as well as languages. (Bermann 2014, 292)

The key words here are: repetition, resistance, displacement, and transformation. But how do these women's choirs question social norms? How do they resist and transform them?

As Mazzella says, they wanted to "break stereotypes", by embodying them wholeheartedly and exaggerating them. This started to become much more evident and clearly defined under Andreoli's directorship. Andreoli revealed that she expressed to the choir "my desire for us to be theatrical, to enhance facial expressions [...] in order to get the message across. It wasn't really necessary because they are already very expressive" (2014). When Maestri was invited to attend La voce della luna's rehearsals for the 2014 Melbourne Festival, she noticed an almost flamboyant impersonation on stage of Italian traits and body language which did not necessarily reflect the more nuanced and toned-down "Italianness" of these women. This might be difficult to understand especially if we apply the common perception of folk singing based on a continuum between life and art (Shepherd 2016). According to this perception, folk singing does not artistically perform a constructed sense of identity. It performs life-like personas. However, this is not always the case. Marvin Carlson explains for example that postcolonial performances are often based not on imitation but on mimicry and counter-mimicry: "Performance of this kind slips back and forth between 'a firm declaration of identity' and parody of the social clichés that haunt that identity" (2004 [1996], 199). Flaunting well-known Italian clichés on stage becomes therefore a destabilizing

carnival, which is as amusing as it is uneasy. Andreoli explained to us how she tried to make *La voce della luna*'s performances visibly humorous and ironic:

There is a song that we perform where there is a woman raving for this gorgeous man. 'I saw him and I stole a kiss from him. And he had the most beautiful shiny black shoes on and white cotton socks' and I looked at the audience and I said 'where was the last time you chose a man for his shiny black shoes and white cotton socks?' and the song is in Italian and it does not matter if they do not understand as we are pointing at the shoes as we are singing, we are pointing at the tie, jacket [...]. There is always a translation along the way or a rough idea. (2014)

Andreoli's translations are not only intersemiotic renditions of *La voce della luna*'s interpretations of Italian folk songs. They are also theatrical metaphors of Italian traits, traits "heightened and parodied – to borrow Bermann's words – in aesthetic performance itself" (2014, 291). *La voce della luna*'s maturity as a group emerged clearly during Andreoli's interview. Although some of the choristers found it challenging at first to stick to Andreoli's agenda and create on stage a caricature of themselves, they all tried to appreciate the reasons for it and embraced its message:

Cause the Italian thing is *la bella figura*, you know 'I am seventy-nine years old, I want to hold myself *composto*, you know, *cosa mi metto a fare così con il seno o con i fianchi?* You know, I am still a respectable grandmother'. But then they find ways to find physical expressions [...]. It is a lovely desire and they feel part of the storytelling. (Andreoli 2014)

In these contexts, humorous mimicry "subverts the operations of colonialism 'from within'" (Carlson 2004 [1996], 198), since it imitates ironically the Italian colonial subject, who in Australia is also the colonized. We see, in this solipsistic disposition, visions, and revisions of Italian traits, the innovative and performative drive of the women's choirs' translational performances. It is innovative/original, because it "tells us something about the world while also affecting the world" (Bermann 2014, 289). And, as Mazzella says: "It was an act of empowerment. They stepped up. 'This is who we are. We are not apologising'" (2014).

In summary, this article aims to pave the way for a new field of research and encourage scholars to work on the transformative activities and forms of activism carried out by women's choirs around the world³. Through membership of the choirs, Italian Australian women find affirmation and validation of cultural and linguistic practices. By becoming part of the same, equal (musical) "social system", they are freed from diverging social and cultural constraints,

³ See, for example, Clarissa Clò (2011).

and power structures. Through the language of music, narratives are perceived beyond the spoken word, and they are able to experience “otherness” as the other of their own selves. This is a transformative process that provides the conditions under which it would seem possible to conduct a complex cultural dialogue within norms of friendship and “love”. The success of the choirs’ cross-cultural performances is in no small part due to the musical directorships of Mazzella and Andreoli. They exemplify and embody the notion of the “singing translators” as they continue to stage theatrical metaphors of cross-cultural encounters with the other while challenging hackneyed expectations and perceptions of migrant economies.

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